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ABSTRACT

A community college's mission statement is a beacon that provides strategic direction for the institution and the conceptual framework for the entire organization. The principal tasks in drafting a new mission statement include matching the current mission to actual institutional functioning, and judging whether the statement is adequate to lead the institution into the future. A successful mission review process should have a clear charge and plan of action, taking into account considerations such as the following: (1) while mission review task force meetings must be carefully planned and controlled, they must also remain flexible enough to allow for the exchange of ideas; (2) gathering up-to-date institutional data and collecting exemplary mission statements from other schools can provide critical information for statement development; (3) college-wide involvement can be insured by appointing a representative task force, surveying all segments of the institution, conducting extensive reviews, involving the board and other constituencies, and providing regular progress updates to the college community; and (4) after a mission statement is adopted, campus-wide forums and mission statement brochures can help disseminate it to all important constituencies. Mission statements can include any of the following: an overall purpose statement; a brief history; a vision statement; and a description of student characteristics and desired outcomes. Revised mission statements may also focus on expanded partnerships with other institutions; greater appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity; expanded use of technology; and a concern for the natural environment. (PAA)

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ASSESSING THE COLLEGE MISSION

An Excellent Starting Point for Institutional Effectiveness

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ASSESSING THE COLLEGE MISSION

An Excellent Starting Point for Institutional Effectiveness

John Quinley
Central Piedmont Community College

How do community colleges maintain excellence as they adapt to a constantly changing, technically advanced, interdependent and complex world? How do colleges meet the demand to nurture greater numbers of students to higher levels of intellectual functioning? How do colleges promote cultural understanding and prepare students to work cooperatively? And how do colleges meet society's call for action and evidence that these new challenges are being addressed? The quest for answers to these critical questions will lead many colleges to reassess their fundamental statement of purpose - the college mission.

The mission is a beacon that provides strategic direction for the institution. It is also the blueprint which provides the basic conceptual framework for the entire organization. A mission which provides appropriate direction and linkage can serve as the base for subsequent measures of institutional effectiveness. The use of these measures to improve programs and services and to better share successes and concerns with key constituencies makes this effort worthwhile.

At the heart of the institutional effectiveness effort, is the measurement of key educational results which clearly emanate from the institutional statement of purpose. This direct connection from stated intent to actual results should be evident at all levels and for all units of the college. The starting point for the institutional effectiveness effort then is to determine if the mission is providing appropriate direction for the institution and to evaluate whether the bond between stated purpose and actually functioning is clear and comprehensive.

PREPARATION AND PROCESS

A successful mission review process has its roots in careful planning. The process should have a clear charge and plan of action. It should be based on a clear understanding of the institution's present and future operating environment both internally and externally. And, it should involve the efforts of the faculty, administration, governing board, and students. The entire process from initial preparation to final adoption and dissemination will take at a minimum six months to complete.

Charge

The basic charge is to draft a statement which will provide institutional direction and foundation in the present and the foreseeable future. The principle tasks include:

1. Determining whether the current mission statement reflects actual functioning. Over time many institutions add functions, for example a transfer division, that are not reflected in their current mission

statement. More probably, changes in institutional emphasis evolve which are not congruent with the current statement.

2. Judging whether the statement is adequate to lead the institution into the future.

3. Crafting a new mission statement.

The charge can also include gaining college-wide understanding and support for the new statement.

Schedule

Since the concept of mission can be elusive, the entire process can easily become protracted. It is thereby important to set an agenda for the entire process in as concrete terms as possible and to carefully plan and control individual meetings. On the other hand, task force members do need time to express their ideas, and flexibility must be maintained throughout the process.

Information

A mission assessment is information intensive, requiring data which provides a good understanding of the past, present, and future. The strategic planning process provides the pertinent information to assess the current and future operating environment of the institution. Planning assumptions and strategic goals reflect the futuristic thinking which should be apparent in a revised mission statement.

The college may also want to conduct a goal inventory study which assesses both the current functioning of individual goals and their degree of importance to the institution. Several commercial agencies have developed goal inventories and assist in the analysis. Colleges can also develop their own instruments.

Other important background items include exemplary mission statements from similar institutions, enabling state legislation documents, accrediting agency materials, and futurist articles and studies from secondary sources. The key to effectively providing this information is to identify the critical pieces without becoming overwhelmed by a massive body of data.

It is also helpful to have the mission task force go through brainstorming exercises in which they think about the future of their institution. The following questions are fundamental to this process. Who will the students be? What programs will they be in? What skills, knowledge, and attitudes will we teach them? How will they be taught? How will we as staff work together? How will we work with the community?

Involvement

College-wide involvement, starting with a firm and enthusiastic endorsement of the President and key college leaders, is essential. Involvement can be ensured by:

1. Appointing of a representative task force, including a pronounced compliment of members from the faculty.

2. Surveying the entire college for perceptions of future directions and current level of functioning.

3. Conducting extensive reviews by key staffs and committees. This is an essential step in fine tuning the document and in gaining institutional acceptance.

4. Involving the Board and other key constituencies. Even if an institution does not elect to involve Board members as part of the mission task force, Board understanding and support is crucial. Ultimately the Board will be asked for their formal approval.

5. Keeping the college community aware of the process via a campus newsletter or circular.

Review

If the mission statement is to become more than a coffee table decoration, it must be understood and supported. There must be a review process, and it is best conducted by principle staffs and committees at the college, as well as by significant members of the greater college community.

In this regard, it is helpful to highlight changes in the revised statement and to forward standard questions for each review setting. And of course, be prepared to bring suggestions back to the task force for further discussion and potential changes. Clear acknowledgment of input from these review groups assists in college-wide adoption of the statement.

Finally, all publications using the mission statement must be reviewed and a schedule for updating developed.

Dissemination

After mission statement adoption, it is vital to "sell" the product. Dissemination presentations and documents should be tailored for all important constituencies. Ideas for dissemination include:

1. Holding college-wide forums.

2. Packaging the mission statement as a brochure.

3. Mailing the statement to key constituencies, such as advisory councils and Board of Trustees.

4. Developing a slide\tape or video presentation which uses the members of the task force and other key members of the college community as spokesmen.

5. Printing and framing the purpose statement to hang in key locations on campus where staff, students, and the community will see it.

CONTENT

A mission statement must address all components of the institution and represent the official posture and practice appropriate to its specific educational role. The statement should include unique features about the institution such as the use of technology and experiential learning.

The mission should be written in a clear and concise manner and include enough detail to provide a clear sense of direction and an explicit framework for subsequent statement of goals and expected educational results. It should be possible to turn every sentence of the mission into a question regarding effectiveness; then evidence can be provided to support the mission contention.

Outline

The mission statement is typically under five pages in length and can include any of the following:

1. An overall purpose statement which captures the essence of the institution in a few paragraphs.

2. A brief history (including founding date, founders, location or locations, and significant developmental changes over the years.

3. Pertinent descriptive information (e.g. public/private, rural/suburban/urban, coeducational, religious affiliation, geographical service region, etc.

4. A vision statement expressing the ideal operating environment and the institutions role within it.

5. Statements expressing institutional values, beliefs, or intent.

6. A description of students/clients including their demographic and socio-economic characteristics, their educational background, any important personal/affective characteristics, and their education/career aspirations.

7. An outline of the major functional areas and the types of occupations and endeavors which graduates are prepared to undertake (e.g. general education, developmental education, vocational and technical education, student development, community or public service, corporate and continuing education, instructional support.)

8. A description of the core skills, knowledge, experiences, and attitudes in the form of educational outcomes, ideally to be acquired or developed by the institution's students.

New Elements

And finally, what can one anticipate as new elements in a revised mission statement? Here are a few ideas:

- Greater involvement with the overall development of the community.
- Expanded partnerships with other institutions of education, business and industry, and governments.
- A more proactive stance in identifying community problems and solutions.
- A renewed concern with reaching out to all segments of society.
- Greater appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity.
- More attention to the development of attitudes which support personal development and ethical understandings.
- Greater flexibility in educational programs and instructional deliveries.
- Greater emphasis on advanced academic skills and mental receptiveness to acquire and apply knowledge.
- An expanded use of technology.
- A commitment to systematically measure institutional effectiveness.
- A concern for the natural environment.

Conclusion

Mission review is a complex and comprehensive process if done properly, but the payoff is enormous. A revitalized mission statement provides a focused direction for the future and a structure by which to evaluate the effectiveness of the entire institutional enterprize.

Edited by
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